

# NSW Institute of Teachers

# THE SPRAY

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NSW INSTITUTE  
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*The Spray* is the latest publication produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research for the NSW Institute of Teachers. *The Spray* joins *The Digest* and *The Knowledge* in a suite of electronic publications issued exclusively by the Institute of Teachers to accredited teachers.

Each edition of *The Spray* presents the views of two commentators addressing a single topic of relevance to education in New South Wales – this edition addresses the national curriculum.

Editor **Steve Holden**, ACER, Press.

The views expressed in this publication do not represent the views or policies of the NSW Institute of Teachers.

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## A national curriculum for all Australia students

*The national curriculum  
will be shaped by the  
best material and  
experience there is, says  
Robert Randall.*

In her welcoming statement to the inaugural meeting of the Interim National Curriculum Board on 23 April 2008, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard described its work as 'a rare opportunity to create a curriculum which helps achieve educational excellence across the whole

community and it should be shaped by the best material and experience there is.'

This 'rare opportunity' has arisen through the convergence of educational, community and political forces seeking to share and enhance high-quality curriculum material through the development of a world-

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class, national curriculum. Those forces gave rise to a collaborative decision by Commonwealth, state and territory governments to develop a single, world-class Australian curriculum for all students from Kindergarten to Year 12. While decisions were being made for a longer-term governance model, the Interim National Curriculum Board was set up to begin the work.

The National Curriculum Board's remit sets a clear agenda for development of the national curriculum. The National Curriculum Board's processes for development of the national curriculum mirror the commitment of the Commonwealth, state and territory governments to strong collaborative partnerships with all its stakeholders.

## What is the national curriculum?

The development of the national curriculum is the enactment of collaborative decision-making of Commonwealth, state and territory governments. The development and implementation of the national curriculum is being conducted under the auspice of the Council of Australian Governments and its Productivity Agenda Working Group.

The purposes of the national curriculum are congruent

with the goals articulated in last December's Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians.

According to its remit the National Curriculum Board's primary role is to develop a national curriculum that:

- › sets core content and achievement standards that are expected of students at each year of schooling
- › provides flexibility for jurisdictions, systems and schools to deliver the national curriculum in a way that allows all students to achieve its standards
- › establishes the standards as the basis for the national testing and measurement program to be agreed by governments, to measure student progress
- › broadens options for students considering different futures, preparing students for further study in all areas of future employment across the trades and technical and professional fields, and in new and emerging areas of knowledge, and
- › ensures that student achievement is reported on the same scale and in a similar way nationally.

In the first instance, the National Curriculum Board is responsible for developing an Australian national curriculum for all students from Kindergarten to Year 12, starting with English, Mathematics, the

Sciences and History. It is also to develop a continuum of learning in literacy and numeracy skills, ranging from basic competence in the early years through to the advancement and extension of these skills in the middle and later years of schooling.

The National Curriculum Board's remit requires a second phase of curriculum development for Languages and Geography. The soon-to-be-established Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority will take over the work started by the Interim National Curriculum Board and will consider when and how national curriculum might be developed for other learning areas.

As it proceeds with its work, the National Curriculum Board will need to consider a number of cross-curriculum dimensions and how they are best addressed in the national curriculum. These include:

- › a futures perspective that addresses the knowledge, skills and competencies to equip young people for the 21st Century
- › the general capabilities that need to be developed within and across particular learning areas
- › stages of schooling and how best to respond to the diversity of prior learning and rates of learning of young people in our schools

- › equity and diversity and the need to set high standards and ensure that they apply to all young Australians
- › literacy and numeracy, and
- › the use of information and communication technology.

The shape of the national curriculum takes account of the changing context of Australia and its place in the world. It is underpinned by clear principles and design specifications. The national curriculum will outline knowledge, understanding and skills within and across curriculum areas, including general capabilities, and achievement standards.

Under its remit, the National Curriculum Board must have its first phase of national curriculum for English, Mathematics, Science and History ready for implementation from 2011. Implementation of the national curriculum is to be the responsibility of state and territory education authorities. The National Curriculum Board will engage in intensive collaborative work with those authorities to support effective implementation.

It is important to note that, under the National Curriculum Board's remit, the national curriculum must take account of contemporary pedagogical research and practice, and its products are intended to enable teachers to develop rich and broad

curriculum of relevance to their own community contexts.

### How will the national curriculum be developed?

The national curriculum is being developed collaboratively. It will be the product of Australians working together to develop a world-best curriculum.

The National Curriculum Board's structure indicates the primacy of collaboration and partnership as operational principles. All state and territory education jurisdictions and Catholic and independent systems have a place at the decision-making table.

The National Curriculum Board is committed to an open process and proper consultation with the profession and the public. To this end, it has set out to engage with a wide range of stakeholders that include:

- › students
- › teachers
- › professional bodies, including professional teacher associations, unions, and business and employer groups
- › education authorities, including school system authorities, state and territory curriculum authorities and teacher regulatory authorities
- › parent groups, and

- › universities, academics and the industry training sector.

Under the auspices of its broad Engagement Strategy, the National Curriculum Board is using a range of processes for two-way communication and consultation with its stakeholders. These include written submissions, online communications and feedback, purpose-specific meetings with stakeholders, forums, focus groups and the use of identified expertise, as well as responding to enquiries from interested parties. Visit the 'Feedback Online' section at [www.ncb.org.au/default.asp](http://www.ncb.org.au/default.asp) for information about how to participate.

To date, this consultation has included a stakeholder forum in every state and territory of Australia and feedback from more than 1,700 education, union, academic, industry and student representatives. In October 2008, national forums in Melbourne attracted almost 600 people to discuss the development of the national curriculum across the four subject areas. The National Curriculum Board will build on this base, through partnerships with state and territory education and curriculum authorities, and through the direct engagement of individuals through its website.

The National Curriculum Board's curriculum

development work will be undertaken within a larger process that involves four broad phases of framing, development, implementation, and evaluation and review.

At the time of writing, curriculum framing papers for English, Mathematics, Science and History – available at [www.ncb.org.au/get\\_involved](http://www.ncb.org.au/get_involved) – are still the subject of wide consultation.

To date, almost 500 submissions have been received from across the broad spectrum of stakeholder groups, with many more expected before March.

The commitment to collaboration will ensure that the national curriculum has its foundations in the nationwide sharing of the existing strengths, experience and expertise of all stakeholders.

The national curriculum will be a world-class curriculum, futures-oriented to keep pace with the changing nature of Australia, its workplaces, and its place in the world.

Successful development and implementation of the national curriculum will be characterised by the continuing commitment of Commonwealth, state and territory governments, and collaborative relationships between the National Curriculum Board and all

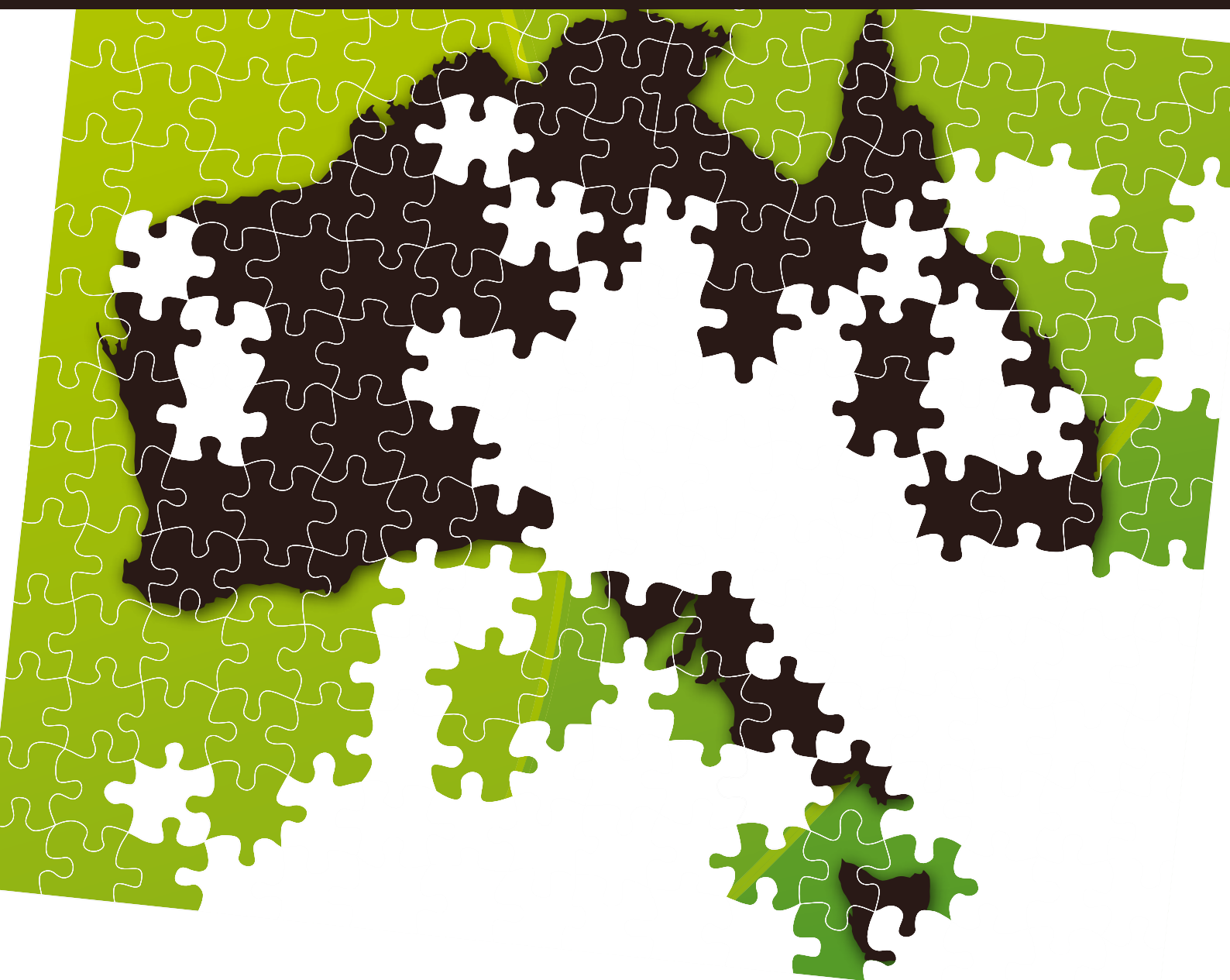
its stakeholder groups. The national curriculum should be seen as a partner to state and territory curriculum, respectful of existing strong historical and contemporary curriculum arrangements.

The development of a national curriculum is a wonderful opportunity to build on those strengths to create the world-class Australian curriculum that is the National Curriculum Board's remit.

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LINKS: To receive updates on the work of the National Curriculum Board or to participate in its consultation processes, register at [www.ncb.org.au](http://www.ncb.org.au)





# A national curriculum? Serious reservations

*Jenny Allum explains why she has serious reservations about a national curriculum as it is currently being developed by the National Curriculum Board.*

I am on record as having serious reservations about a national curriculum.

I want to make it clear at the outset: we are not starting to design the most appropriate system of governance for the whole of our country from scratch. We have had, in existence for over 100 years, three tiers of governments – Commonwealth, state and local. We don't have a clean slate from which to start. We have a history. The state and territory parliaments continue. We have a Constitution which specifies areas of responsibility for the different levels of government and there are well defined processes by which we, as a democracy, can change those constitutional arrangements. Most importantly, we have a history of education in each state; a tradition; an ethos.

No matter what the Commonwealth government may wish, education is, by our Constitution, a state responsibility. That means that, whatever is done at the Commonwealth level, the reality is that any state government can – and is likely to – reject the work of the National Curriculum Board if the proposals do not suit the educational or political wish of that government.

Should a state government not support the final curriculum documents

designed by the National Curriculum Board, there would be a stand-off for some time; some behind-the-scenes negotiations would take place; possibly there would be some financial pressure exerted by the Commonwealth government on the state. And of course there would be headlines in all the major newspapers.

That's a political reality which we just can't avoid in our country, whether we like it or not. And hence the fact is that the National Curriculum Board will want to and indeed will have to do all it can to avoid such a confrontation with any state. The players in all this are political beings, and the result is that they will, by necessity, be forced into compromise as they design the structure and content of the curriculum – and political compromise will never result in educational excellence!

Those who support a national curriculum in Australia argue most often on two grounds: that a country of 20 or so million people can't support the number of different curricula which we have in Australia, and that children of parents transferred interstate are disadvantaged by discontinuities in curricula across state borders.

They will often point to England, which, with 50

million people, has one curriculum – and so, they argue should we. They less often remark that, Scotland, with a population comparable with Victoria, has its own curriculum. They also don't often concede that the United States, the most mobile population on earth, has no national curriculum. The real issue here, as far as I'm concerned, is not the number of people in the country. It's the vastness of the distances between us; the distances between states – geographically, and in our educational cultures.

The National Curriculum Board claims to value a consultative curriculum development process. I just don't see it! There were four academics appointed to write the Framing Papers for the different subjects. How were they appointed? Using what process?

There are reference groups formed in each subject area. Whom do they represent? Was there a transparent process used to form these – to gain representation from all of the different stakeholders? One doubts it, when more than 50 per cent of the Mathematics Advisory Group, for example, comes from Victoria.

There are no clear procedures outlined in any documentation I have seen for methods of consultation,

for representation. The National Curriculum Board's website says nothing about whom they will consult, or whom they regard as the peak bodies in education. The best you can see is that they encourage all teachers to send in comments on-line. What they do with the submissions is not clear.

Consider for a moment the consultation forums held in Melbourne last October. My school, SCEGGS Darlinghurst, had six teachers there, at least one in each of the subject-specific meetings. No funding was provided for any teachers to attend these forums. My staff were able to attend because SCEGGS could afford to pay all the associated costs. Is this an example of a national consultation process that will ensure that all schools – from every region and every background – have an opportunity to contribute? And for those who were unable to attend, where is the public report from these forums, describing the discussions and differing perspectives?

In NSW, we are used to the NSW Board of Studies, which is committed to collaborative work with parents, teachers and schools. At every level there are representatives of the different stakeholders in the production of curriculum materials – around the Board



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table itself; in curriculum reference panels; Board of Studies Curriculum Committees in every subject during the design of a syllabus; in working parties and forums established from time to time. The Board of Studies has liaison officers in each region in NSW to work closely with schools. Board of Studies officers travel the state to consult on new initiatives. The Board of Studies recognises that there is enormous diversity in NSW and that any NSW curriculum needs to work as well in Bondi as it does in Broken Hill. We have a very strong curriculum as a result of this process. How different when you compare this with the consultations on any national initiative, current or past.

The best education happens in our schools when the approach to curriculum, assessment and professional development all complement each other. The National Curriculum Board is developing curricula in Mathematics, English, Science and History, with Geography and Languages to come 'later'. What message does that send to Social Studies, Art, Music, Physical Education and the other subjects included in the curriculum in different states and at different stages?

What plans exist to ensure that the documents of

a national curriculum are practical and can be implemented in all schools? For example, how does the National Curriculum Board plan to support primary teachers who may have four new syllabuses to work with simultaneously? There is no talk of any teacher professional development or support.

There is so little known about the directions for the national curriculum. We don't even know how many different courses will be offered at the senior level within the Mathematics discipline, for example. Will we have a Mathematics course as rigorous as the NSW Extension 2 (4 Unit) Mathematics course? Will our students still have access to Modern History, Ancient History and opportunities for independent research as in our current Extension course? I don't want to lose the rigour of all NSW syllabuses – in every subject, and at every level from Kindergarten to Year 12. There is not yet any discussion about topics to be included in any of the courses of the national curriculum, nor about the depth or breadth of the syllabuses.

While the detail of it all is still to come, the date for implementation is January 2011. That's fewer than two years from now! The national

curriculum is too important in the education of our young people and for the future of our society for us to cede control to a remote body without 'runs on the board.'

Proponents of a national curriculum often argue that it will ensure the highest-quality curriculum for all students across Australia. Why should it? It is being developed by groups of people – people who can get it right or get it wrong – just as has happened in the states at various times. A national curriculum is not necessarily an excellent curriculum, especially if developed with little consultation or funding and on an unrealistic timeline.

I would support a national curriculum if:

- › it was a broad curriculum, well supported by an appropriate professional development program, and well funded
- › those designing the curricula were appointed by a transparent process
- › the process was collaborative, with all stakeholders around Australia consulted at the national body's expense, and
- › the timelines were such that the goal of a world-class curriculum and assessment regime was achievable.

I would only accept a national curriculum if it was at least as good as the NSW curriculum we have now.

*Jenny Allum is the Head of SCEGGS Darlinghurst, Sydney, a position she has held since 1996. From 1991 to 1995 she was Manager of the Curriculum Branch of the New South Wales Board of Studies, responsible for the development of all school curriculum in the state from Kindergarten to Year 12. She was chair of the NSWIACT branch of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools from 2004 to 2005, and before that chaired the Academic Committee of that Association. She is a Fellow of the Australian College of Educators. She has published widely in educational journals and in the Sydney Morning Herald.*

